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### His-story and Her-story: An Overview of Morrison's Women Characters

Abstract: Narrativizing history has always been a business fraught with the problem of trusting the gaze of the author. Toni Morrison's penetrating treatment of a historical holocaust in her novels, questions the very mode of historicity that suffers from homogenization. The works of Morrison largely reflect the history of African Americans and their continued socio-political struggles. She has made use of the novel as a structure of interrogating the discourse of slavery. Slavery has used up or degraded all the bodily relationships, connections and instinctual drives, "For a baby she throws a powerful spell" (Morrison 5), states Denver at the outset of the narrative. Morrison draws the picture of women's lives that are often defined by and limited to the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal capitalist society. The very act of contemplating womanhood is as much political as it is personal. As a result, the different roles women play in their lives, as motherhood tends to evoke strong feelings in women as well as a passionate rhetoric in our cultural discourses. In the paper, I would investigate how Toni Morrison re-writes the experiences of black mothers and daughters during and immediately after the days following the abolition of slavery in the United States. Morrison tends to show the complexity of a black woman's

experience as a mother, how she challenges the norms of motherhood and how she eventually emerges as a strong personality with a firm sense of justice. Motherhood is about personal and political empowerment in her novels, an act of resistance, integral and important for the black people in their fight against racism and sexism. My paper would focus upon the parallels between narratives of slavery, femininity, and motherhood in the novels of Morrison. For a black woman, racial discrimination together with gender inequality is a lethal combination. This dual oppression is found to have existed since decades. Morrison's women characters grapple to (de)objectify themselves from the patriarchal hegemony, as the crisis of subjectivity; powerlessness is reaffirmed by the sexual abuse they endure.

*Keywords:* femininity, womanhood, motherhood, historical narrative.

## Introduction

African American slave narratives often focussed upon male suppression and subjugation without referring to women's historical struggle. Morrison chose to broadcast women's sufferings and their sexual objectification as slaves. Black women form the inner dark circle of the societal structure. Their marginalization has been never said aloud, but Morrison chose to voice the marginalized through her narratives. My research highlights the women characters of Morrison's novels, their transformation and how their journey is defined throughout her narrative. Moreover, these women, who are the victims of the ugly patriarchy develops themselves and from the object of trade, they become the subject who carries forth the essence of the text with them. These weaker section who never received any attention in literary history, has been found as the main characters in Morrison's works, like, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Beloved* (1987). Morrison, in doing so, aims at breaking the "stony silence" imposed upon African American women by the white mainstream literature (Mondal

2). Morrison herself declared that she decided to write for and about the black women after realizing that “[African American women] didn’t exist in all of the literature [she] had read . . . [she] had to bear witness to what was not recorded” (Sandi 92). African American women endured suppression from an early period due to their birth and race. History even speaks about how a slave mother was harassed and how she faced hardships being separated from their children while they were still very young. They were denied the right to their bodies and became “property that reproduced itself without cost” (Morrison 269). Slave women were forced to have as many children as their masters wished. She did not have any option to choose, a mere mechanical being is what a slave woman was believed to be. She was not given the choice whether she wants to be a mother or not, moreover, their painful experiences of slavery distorted their notion of motherhood and womanhood altogether. Slavery has made them numb and the scars of slavery are just not physical but also psychological which even haunts them several years after their attainment of freedom. Sethe in *Beloved* is compelled to leave Sweet Home, the plantation where she worked as a slave, after realizing that the schoolteacher viewed her as an animal. Sethe states, “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (Morrison 295). She discovered the malice and the brutality of slavery that was inflicted upon the black body preventing them from attaining a self-identity and self-sufficiency. This perspective of the African American slaves projected havoc on their psychology and they become mere machines driven by the whims of the white race. This however, figures out the distortion in their personality, an obscurity and a double consciousness to be very specific.

Toni Morrison is one of the most widely read and highly regarded African American novelist. Her wide range of work tells the untold stories of African American race who could not survive the struggle. Her works has been translated in numerous languages, including

French, German, Italian, Spanish and many more. Her works received universal appeal since they are 'universal' in the truest sense. The adjective 'universal' is applied to her works for covering the issue of slave history from the perspective of women, her objectification and her fight to release herself from the bondage of labour and her final cry when she succeeds, makes her work universal. Her skilful use of language is an analysis of her powerful scream against the dehumanizing effects of slavery on the African American people. It provides a cultural and historical process and a critical insight. Her powerful use of narrative and imagery makes her novels prudent in its own way. She has been a teacher, an editor, a fiction writer, a critic, and she has always focussed on writing as a social phenomenon of change and viewed writing as a document or a manifesto that would make history known to people. She taught in a number of colleges and while she was a senior editor at Random House, she published at least five novels. Her novels are inextricable and are a social manifesto that she designed with the help of her intellect and experience. She was an eminent critic who asserts that the role of a reader must be coherently active and not passive. Indeed, the reader must be actively engaged in the process of meaning making. In "The Dancing Mind," her 1996 acceptance speech delivered on receiving the Distinguished Contribution to American Literature Award from the National Book Award Foundation, she writes:

"Underneath the cut of bright and dazzling cloth, pulsing beneath the jewelry, the life of the book world is quite serious. Its real life is about creating and producing and distributing knowledge; about making it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one's own mind dancing with another's; about making sure that the environment in which this work is done is welcoming, supportive."

She tries to tell that literature has the power to make a reader feel and comprehend. The language she chooses to write shows a reader how she wants to dismantle the hierarchy of oppression, the system of domination. She tries to break the inequality in the social

structure through the language that she uses, she herself said, “eliminating the potency of racist constructs in language is the work I can do” (Morrison 4). Morrison wrote for her tribe and there is music in it or a celebration of the richness of her tribe. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is all about Pecola Breedlove, who is always referred as an ugly student by her teachers and her classmates because of her dark complexion. There is an insatiable desire in her to adapt to the lifestyles and manners of a white girl. She feels the distaste of the society for her when she enters a departmental store and the shopkeeper refuses to pay her any attention. The use of the ‘eye’ imagery by Morrison is even deeper. Pecola’s sense of individuality is highlighted (‘eye’ stands for the metaphoric ‘I’) when she starts accepting, her own ways and stop acquiring the ways of the world. This is a voice that has been raised through the bluest eye, the eye that could see the world and change the world while living in it on her own way. *Song of Solomon* (1977) opens with the appearance that Smith’s attempt to fly from the top of the Mercy Hospital. The appearance of Smith at flight on the roof causes Ruth to go to labour. The excitement of the situation and her pregnancy made the hospital admit her and she delivers a baby boy, Macon Dead III – the first African American child to be born in the hospital. Here we find Pilate first singing her song of “sugarman”. Macon at the age of four was given his nickname, Milkman. Morrison glorifies the character of Pilate, a bootlegger and quasi-witch woman, who is the central figure in the novel and throughout Milkman’s growth from adolescent to his thirties. Throughout the novel, Macon searches for an individual identity and his desperation in building up a platform for himself. His self-realization and his need to answer the questions; who he is and how he lives, is the basis of the novel. The novel is a combination of the consequences of slavery, patriarchy and the development of self-worth, and it challenges the question of African American identity and the coarse relationship between the white Americans and the black community. The institution of slavery in the novel is intertwined with elements of cultural metaphor. *Tar Baby*

(1981) is a complex portrayal of a love relationship between two African Americans, Jardine and Son. Nevertheless, both are raised in different backgrounds. Morrison depicts slavery in a much-nuanced way here in *Tar Baby*. Jardine's uncle and aunt works as domestic servants in a rich white household, whereas, Son, an impoverished young man who washes up at the Street's estate on a Caribbean island. Morrison uses the metaphoric title *Tar Baby* to mean the black girl, who suffers to gain identity in an otherwise racist and sexist society. Jardine and Son, both struggle hard to find their identity and a place for their own, leaving behind the clasp of servitude. Morrison here again questions slavery and, how slavery is not allowing the black race to acquire peace in their otherwise mundane lives. African American history is best exemplified in the novel *Jazz* (1992) by Morrison. Most of the narrative takes part in Harlem during the 1920s. The novel mirrors the melody of its title and is a celebration of individuality, culture and tradition of the black race. Violet, the central figure of the novel feels difficult to live in the city life and is traumatised by the black race's history and she always try to breach the gap that separates her husband from her. Amidst the chaos of the individual relationships, the city of Harlem emerges as an omnipotent force in shaping their lives. Morrison in each of her novels brings out the menaces of slavery and goes further how slavery shapes a man's or a woman's life. Being a very independent writer herself, she sees women as an individual first and then women. Morrison celebrates womanhood, the acceptance of a woman's sexual difference and rejoices the differences. There is a celebration of sisterhood in her novels, and *Sula* is the primary example of it. Nel and Sula both are tied in the thread of sisterhood, they nurtured friendship and the strong bond between them could never pull them apart. This friendship acts as a pillar against slavery, the uncompromising power, and a wayward force tries to demolish the world that tries to hold them down. *Beloved* is no exception. The narrative challenges the structure of the society and sees women as agents of change and revolution, and, how the world of love alters to the world of violence

and death for Sethe. Yet she stands triumphant, losing every pleasure but gaining freedom for her Beloved. There is a celebration in the language employed and rejoice in every tone.

Morrison brings out the importance of holocaust literature in front of us.

Morrison emphasises on the least powerful, dominated, subjugated and marginalised black women and how throughout history her-story has been repressed deep within. All her novels give a space to these voiceless mothers and daughters, whose stories remained untold. The dominance of the white race in the United States rendered very limited space for the black women to grow. They were but the beasts of burden, in plantations or in household; they only bore the burden of their labour. The history of black slaves and the history of women's struggle in the enslavement period are shown in this chapter and how Morrison goes forward to depicting the excruciating hardships of her women protagonists. The novels of Morrison are a depiction the untold history of these mothers and daughters who survived the middle passage. The concept of motherhood in Morrison's novels and how the women in her novels empower themselves by creating self-definitions, and self-valuations that enable themselves to establish positive, multiple images and to repel against negative, controlling representations of black womanhood. Black women confront and dismantle the "overarching" and "interlocking" structure of domination in terms of race, class, and gender oppression. They recognize their distinct cultural heritage that gives them the energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination. The battle of the mothers against the patriarchal society and its multiple sins of sexism, racism and homophobia; Morrison aims to show the struggle of the women characters. The deliberate grapple to (de)objectify themselves (black mothers) from the shackles of patriarchal hegemony, the claustrophobia of a mother, and how a fragile woman turns to be a valiant mother, will be discussed in detail in the next chapters. The graphical description of the physical and psychological violence of a black mother, and how she goes through the public and private sphere of negotiation can be

estimated when one goes through the pages of history. The crisis of subjectivity, the powerlessness of the women and the objectification of the mothers, is reaffirmed by the physical and sexual abuse they endure. The research will outline the transformation that happens on a broader aspect, the journey of Morrison's women from helplessness to powerfulness. They gain subjectivity and individuality and Morrison gives voice to the voiceless. Morrison's penetrating treatment of the historical holocaust questions the very modes of the narratives of history. Morrison expresses the 'self' in her novels, the selves that were buried in the past.

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